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This entry offers a historical account of media in Afghanistan and discusses the media there in the present day. The development of media in Afghanistan was long hampered by state censorship, but press freedom has improved since the 2001 fall of the Taliban regime. Despite many successes, Afghan media outlets still struggle with the persistent problem of financial distress.

Afghanistan, a country located between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, was once a crucial node connecting different networks of commercial and cultural communications in the region. The ancient merchants of the Silk Road passed through its cities on their way from China to Europe. The 18th-century rise of British colonialism in neighboring India and the expansion of sea trade routes isolated Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's communication industry, throughout its history, has been marked by two leading challenges: (1) the high rate of illiteracy, which limits the reach of print media, and (2) varying degrees of government censorship preventing the free flow of information. In the post-2001 era, with the fall of the Taliban regime and the emergence of a Western-supported new government, the situation for a free press in the country has improved. This relatively better environment was made possible thanks to the growth of digital communication technology and support from the international community.

History

The first newspaper to be published in Afghanistan was *Shams al-Nahar*, a weekly newspaper based in the capital Kabul that later became the biweekly and then the monthly. Amir Sher Ali Khan (1863–1879), the Afghan king, established the paper in 1875 as part of his move to modernize Afghanistan. After Sher Ali Khan, it took 27 years before the next newspaper was printed in Afghanistan. Under the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan (1901–1919), the government published *Siraj al-Akhbar*. The biweekly, which first appeared in 1906, was edited by Abdul Rauf Kandahari and then from 1911 to 1919 under the direction of Mahmud Tarzi. For his works at *Siraj al-Akhbar*, Tarzi is widely considered the father of Afghan journalism.

The two first papers, *Shams al-Nahar* and *Siraj al-Akhbar*, were both royal enterprises published as a modernization project. Their circulations were limited in number and in geographical coverage. Most of the contents published in both newspapers were translated from English, Urdu, Turkish, or French sources. These translations, other than providing the Afghans with a picture of faraway lands, helped modernize the Afghan Persian language. Written Persian in 19th-century Afghanistan was highly complex, loaded with heavy Arabic words, and translation from European sources transformed the grammar and punctuation system and enriched its vocabulary—a linguistic milestone that simplified the language as a whole and brought it closer to spoken Persian.

There are two official languages in Afghanistan: Persian, the lingua franca, and Pashto, the language of the Pashtun tribes that have produced nearly all of Afghanistan's leaders for centuries. In the mid-20th century, as part of Pashtun nationalism, the state wanted to suppress Persian by declaring Pashto the only official language of bureaucracy and education. It was a failed experiment as many Afghans could not speak Pashto. Failing to suppress Persian, the government named it Dari in the 1964 constitution, in order to give the language a distinct identity and separate it from Iranian Persian.

In the 1920s, Amir Amanullah Khan, a young and ambitious king, launched a comprehensive modernization program. He brought enormous reforms in government bureaucracy, military, and education. During his rule, more than a dozen newspapers were published in Afghanistan including a women's magazine called *Ershad al-Niswan* (The Guidance of Women) founded by Queen Soraya, Amanullah's wife. Amanullah also established the first Afghan radio station in 1925 with two transmitters, one installed in Kabul and the other in the southern province of Kandahar. His radical approach in transforming the country from a traditional into a modern one was faced with opposition from the clergy, who then mobilized the rural communities to revolt against the state, a conflict that eventually dethroned the king.

The next rulers of the country did not pursue any dramatic reform programs. Instead, they tried to solidify their control over the population by suppressing free press and political dissent. In particular, between 1929 and

1946, when Mohammad Hashim Khan was the prime minister, authoritarian practices, such as government surveillance and communication interception, were intensified.

In the 1960s, King Mohammad Zahir, the Afghan monarch, probably under pressure from the international community, introduced a number of reform programs that allowed the publication of an independent press and the formation of political parties. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the Afghan communist party, was founded in that decade and so were various other political organizations. Afghan historians call the 1960s the decade of democracy.

The most vocal groups in this decade were the communists, who ran three influential papers: (1) Khalq, representing the hard-liner Afghan communists; (2) Parcham, which maintained a slightly softer rhetoric; and (3) Shula-e Javid, which had a more intellectual approach highlighting class struggles and reporting on the lives of the poor. The first two were strongly Soviet-leaning papers, while the last one represented the views of the Afghan Maoists.

Afghanistan's leftist press reached its peak after the 1978 communist coup that brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power. The communist regime, faced with widespread opposition at home and abroad, used the press to push its reforms. The regime also took advantage of a new state television station developed under the previous ruler, President Mohammad Daud Khan (1973–1978). Well aware of the power of the media, the Afghan communists invested heavily in various communication and cultural institutions and produced print and audiovisual content in different languages to reach far and deep into Afghan society. They produced an impressive number of films, music recordings, books, and newspapers, though all of them had to strictly follow the official ideology.

In 1992, Islamic fighters overthrew the communist regime and established an Islamic state in Kabul. The new rulers made an attempt to Islamize Afghan cultural institutions by enforcing hijab on TV and banning women's singing. Soon, however, the disputes over power-sharing deals triggered a devastating civil war among them that lasted until 1996, when the Taliban emerged and took over almost the entire country. The Taliban proved to be even more radical: They outlawed music, photography, cinema, television, and painting. The public radio was renamed Radio Voice of Sharia and stopped broadcasting any instrumental music; however, it constantly played unaccompanied religious chants.

From the beginning of the communist era in 1978 to the end of Taliban rule in 2001, the Afghan press was tightly controlled and was dominated by ideological propaganda. To get an alternative source of information, the public listened to radio stations based in other countries. In particular, British Broadcasting Corporation's Dari and Pashto services played, and continue to play, a great role as influential sources of information in Afghanistan. Radio is popular mainly because of the largely illiterate population and the lack of electricity in the country, especially in rural areas, which limits people's access to television and the Internet.

After 2001: A New Era

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, which led to the American invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime was overthrown and a new government was installed. Backed by the United States and the rest of the international community, the new Afghan government committed to improving conditions for freedom of expression. A great number of newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations were founded all over the country in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion. Almost all these media organizations were funded either by the international community or by the former warlords. Everyone seemed to embrace the relatively free environment to raise their voices. Even the Taliban, which banned visual media when they were in power, widely used video technology and social networking sites to disseminate their messages.

In the post-Taliban era, Afghanistan has witnessed the emergence of commercial media on a large scale. A growing number of Afghan media are mainly financed through ad sales to large corporations as well as to international organizations and Afghan government institutions. Along with direct advertisements, a widespread practice in Afghan media is for messages from a sponsor to be woven secretly into a story. The sponsors in these cases are rarely disclosed, although in short anti-insurgency public service announcements from government agencies, television networks add disclosures at the end. The U.S. Agency for International

Development is one of the largest foreign donors to the Afghan press. Although the foreign assistance has been vital in fostering free media in the country, it has proved an unsustainable solution for the long run. As international aid has decreased in recent years, many media organizations have ceased operating.

Although as of early 2018 no journalists were imprisoned in Afghanistan, Reporters Without Borders in 2017 ranked the country 118 of 178 in terms of media freedom. That is due to the threats posed by Taliban insurgents, local warlords, and occasionally government authorities to journalists working in the country. Between 2001 and early 2018, around 43 journalists were killed in Afghanistan. Although the Afghan government has shown a great amount of tolerance toward media in recent years, there are, however, red lines that media cannot cross, the most important ones being criticizing orthodox Islamic beliefs and showing nudity. Since the early 2000s, the government has shut down several newspapers after complaints from the clergy over content they considered to be against Islam. In October 2014, The Afghanistan Express, for instance, was shut down over publishing an op-ed on Islam and violence.

Almost every former warlord in Afghanistan has one or more media outlets. Some politicians who are in power, too, own media organizations with funding from undisclosed sources. A great number of Afghan media are, either fully or partly, funded by foreign aid organizations and Western embassies. Only a few media organizations are commercially successful enough to rely on ad sales to operate. TOLO TV and 1TV are two examples of such media organizations, the former owned by MOBY Group, now an international media company based in Dubai, and the latter owned by Fahim Hashemi, a young businessman who made his fortunes from contracts to supply the North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan and the Afghan army. Print media, much like in previous decades, are struggling financially, and no print media outlet in Afghanistan has a circulation of more than a few thousand copies. Other than long-running state newspapers such as Anis and Islah, there are a number of independent newspapers, of which Hasht-i Subh and Itila at-i Ruz are the two most influential ones.

In 2001, Afghan people had to travel to another country to make a phone call abroad. There were only 12,000 landlines in Kabul, a city of 2 million. After the fall of the Taliban, however, Afghanistan embraced the global digital revolution. In 2002, Ehsan Bayat, an Afghan American, established a cellular network provider, the Afghan Wireless Communication Company, for the first time in the country. Soon after, four more companies followed. Today, 71% of Afghans have access to mobile phones and 10% to the Internet. Afghanistan has come a long way from Shams al-Nahar to the current stage where 89 TV networks, 220 radio stations, and hundreds of print periodicals operate in the country. In comparison with other countries in the Islamic world, the Afghan media can be considered to operate relatively freely, but whether this environment is sustainable depends primarily on Afghanistan's security situation.

See also [Censorship](#); [Digital Revolution](#); [Globalization of Mass Media](#); [Iran](#)

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